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Setting in a recent moving-picture production, designed by Hugo Ballin—winner of the Clarke and Hallgarten prizes—who is devoting almost his entire attention to the artistic development of the motion-picture drama.

THE MOTION-PICTURE EMERGING AS ART

THE motion-picture is still an unknown quantity, but it is not the dark mystery to-day it was a dozen years ago. Every condemnation of the pictures has been justified in its time; every revolt from the boorishness and the stupidity of the films has had its excuse and has been well founded. Yet reflection on the part of those subtle-minded enough to flee from imaginative expression of this kind will lead them to see this newest venture of the human imagination from a new viewpoint.

In its way the motion-picture is more nearly miraculous than steam and gas-motoring or flying. Man has long been used to consider the mechanical and physical aspects of nature as capable of infinite expansion, so long as his mind could go on reaching out into the spaces of the unknown and abstracting therefrom increasing stores of the unknown forces residing there. But the motion-picture is mechanical only in its aspect, not in its essential result. It is a mechanical procedure in the fact that it applies a combination of mechanical principles. But the application of these principles to the imaginative forces of the human mind has produced something entirely new and astonishing.

There has been a good deal of talk at one time and another of the fact that here was the basis for a new art, but the motion-picture has failed to profit from this by the fact that persons who were equipped by training and æsthetic experience to shed new light on a miracle of unknown potentiality turned away in disdain. One or two psychologists have commented fitfully on its relation to the kinetic quality of modern life, but this

was after all a superficial observation, with little basis in actual study of a new phenomenon. The fact that now, after all the world's history, the muses will have to be renumbered has only lately drawn the interest of imaginative and creative critics.

Aside from its amazing projection into a world that had already settled that there should be seven arts and no more, the motion-picture has had to endure the handicap of being confused by the sources of its development. As one of the arts of vision it has been intimately associated with the stage and the camera. It has suffered by this relationship in two ways, first by being forced to bear comparison with these two sources, and second by not being allowed until late to develop on a parallel line with the best selected parts of them. It is only now, when a thoroughly scientific and critical examination of both has been gotten under way, that the motion-picture begins to emerge in its true appearance as an art form.

It is the painter probably who first threw photography off the track, and laid the way for confusing and retarding the development of the film. The painter, confronted by still photography in its crudest form, in the first appearance of the photographer who thought he might improve on pigment by means of an actual transcription, retired in horror, crying that no art could be found in imitation. The painter was right. Nature is sufficient in its existence; it does not need to be copied. The function of the artist, as Oscar Wilde somewhat paradoxically pointed out, is always to improve on nature, in other words to lie about it in order

to achieve a greater truth. Nature, said Wilde, forgetting as usual to quote Baudelaire, who said it first—nature is always trying to imitate art, or at least seeming to raise itself to the height that art, being art, is able to reach. Not until the photographer himself discovered this and discarded the principle of imitation was he able to shed his old caste and enter the higher plane of the artist. Photographers such as Genthe have learned long since the principle of selection of details, and the distribution and manipulation of accents in design and composition, quite in the manner of the painter.

But this growth in understanding of the still photographer is itself a late development, and it came too late to save the motion-picture from a long and circuitous and painful adolescence, from which it is not yet entirely emerged. The legend of the traditional theatre was an additional burden. The first motion-picture dramas could not escape creation and projection under the assumption that they were variations of the art of the theatre. Here again the truth was uttered in some measure, but the early creators of film-drama had no idea what this measure should be. The technique of the stage was picked up bodily and crammed, as much of it as possible, into the crudely drawn limitations of the screen story.

Where the film-drama now begins to profit is in a new development of stagecraft, and in a new understanding of all the laws of lighting, perspective, design and composition as they are applicable to the legitimate theatre. What has happened therefore is an investigation of the æsthetic principles underlying both of the arts which contribute to the film-drama, photography and the theatre, and their enunciation on a basis from which special and appropriate laws may be drawn for the screen.

Here at least the picture-play has not been slow in availing itself of new facilities that would impel it toward the point of emergence as a separate and distinct art form. Producers and directors, men such as Griffith and Goldwyn, have been quick to see that mere narrative, the mere accumulation of episode and climax, is not sufficient; they have understood that the astonishing facilities at their command gave them a new power over beauty and that they had at hand a new magic with which to evoke it.

The real history of the motion-picture begins therefore at this point, where the film-drama begins to show something of the feeling for values, command over emphasis, pattern in the rise and fall of the action, and design and harmony and composition in the selection and ordering of backgrounds, that the other graphic arts show at their best.

The pictures still have nothing comparable in the field of experiment to the researches of an artist such as Gordon Craig or Max Reinhardt or Stanislavsky. But neither has the theatre on Broadway, which, by the stress of being forced to please a public, finds its best active and practical expression in the work of Arthur Hopkins, and Robert Edmund Jones, sometimes Winthrop Ames, Copeau, and some of the smaller and less conventional groups that appear and reappear on Broadway. To match this record of experiment and investigation, the pictures can offer "Lasky lighting," the new glow which helped Farrar win her first screen applause, the dramatic shadows of Thomas Ince, the close-ups of David Griffith, and the suggestive simplicity in setting that Hugo Ballin gave to Goldwyn. Lighting is something with which the stage is already familiar, although for a long time departures from old styles were considered revolutionary. But it has taken

the screen to discover to what uses shadows may be put, and it is the screen now which seems to be taking the lead in the simplification of settings, the projection of the background as an additional note of emotion in the whole composition of human action.

The motion-picture drama seems safely on its way now in an understanding of the fact that the film story requires a separate and distinct treatment from mere motion-picture photography. The film has had to tread a long and stony path to the discovery that if it aspired to the Olympian peaks of art, it would have to divorce itself from reality and assume the understanding that art puts forward something finer and more intense than mere imitation; that art in other words is a selection from the materials of reality, raised to a higher power than they appear in actual life.

The future of the screen lies in mystery, but it is not difficult to foresee the development of forms of amazing and astonishing beauty on this foundation now beginning to be firmly and solidly laid. As an æsthetic problem the film still has to consider a

new form for the scenario and establish a new basis for its narrative. It still has to decide whether it is to be a form of the conventional drama or is only the picturization of a story. In this respect it seems to tend more and more to leave the stage behind it and to adopt the devices and quality of the short story. In the conventional stage-drama the action has a regular rhythm almost, a rise to climax and a fall to *denouement*. But in the short story the action rises and goes on rising until almost the very end, and then closes with a swift point, what in the O. Henry kind of story came to be known as "the punch at the curtain." The screen, it appears, is moving more and more to that form of action. The present form of narrative is inadequate and without distinction. It lacks unique qualities in presentation to make the result memorable when the subject-matter gives room for dignity. Scenario writers, producers engaged in developing the mechanics of presentation, are still involved in the problem of dealing in what is yet a new medium. Many discoveries of new principles remain to be made.